

RSC Outlook: Obama's Nuclear Options

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On April 6, 2010, President Obama released the [Nuclear Posture Review](#) (NPR), in which the Administration outlines capacity and capabilities of the U.S. nuclear arsenal and the circumstances under which the U.S. would use nuclear weapons over the course of the next decade. Specifically, the NPR changes the role of nuclear weapons in defense policy by reducing the number of potential U.S. nuclear targets and asserts that the U.S. will not use nuclear weapons to respond to a chemical or biological attack from a nation that had signed and met their obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

On April 8, 2010, the United States and Russia signed the [New START](#) treaty to replace the Strategic Arms Reduction treaties negotiated after the end of the Cold War in the 1990s. The treaty will replace the START I Treaty of 1991 and requires each country to reduce its long-range nuclear missiles by approximately 30% to a total of 1550 warheads. The treaty would also limit the number of long range aircraft and submarines that can carry first-strike weapons in half to 800 units. Since this is a treaty, it must be ratified by the United States Senate by receiving a minimum of 67 votes, requiring the support of at least eight Republicans. The last START follow-up treaty took three years to ratify in the 1990s.

On Tuesday, the United States concluded a two day [nuclear weapons summit](#) where forty-seven nations participated in negotiations to address issues concerning illicit trade of nuclear material and securing vulnerable stocks from terrorist access. The ultimate goal of the summit was to create a "better nuclear culture" through increased education and training of nuclear experts, particularly from vulnerable countries.

In just over a week, the Obama administration has made the most significant proposed changes to our nuclear arsenal since the United States and former U.S.S.R. first discussed nuclear disarmament. Some conservatives have expressed concern that these proposals could undermine our nation's ability to set up missile defenses to protect against an attack from Iran or North Korea or rouge actors like al-Qaeda. Additionally, these proposed changes threaten our ability to maintain a strong nuclear deterrent and combat proliferation. Supporting measures that create a smaller and less reliable nuclear capacity will not serve as an incentive for other nations to disarm.

This document outlines some serious concerns to the revisions made by the President to our nuclear weapons strategy.

- ***Creating a Non-Nuclear America:*** Since the birth of nuclear weapons sixty-five years ago, many liberals have supported unilateral gestures and disarmament. Some conservatives have expressed the belief that the policy changes advocated by the President are to reduce our nuclear leverage in order to eventually encourage the world to abandon the use of weapons throughout the world. The Presidents' NPR also calls for the United States to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty which could prevent us from modernizing our nuclear forces to meet ever-changing threats.

Unfortunately, nuclear weapons are not something that can be un-invented and will always be of interest to world actors. Even a former senior advisor to President Carter understands this problem and [writes that](#) moving toward a non-nuclear America will have “no discernible effect” on nuclear weaponry in rogue or unstable nations and in the hands of terrorists.

- ***Open Playbook:*** Some conservatives argue that removing “strategic ambiguity” from the nation's nuclear policy opens the door for terrorists or enemy states to use non-nuclear weapons against the U.S. A public and detailed nuclear strategy that identifies nations immune from a U.S. response to a chemical, biological or cyber attack has the potential to empower many different enemies.
- ***Going in Reverse:*** Conservatives agree with commendable goals like keeping nuclear weapons out of terrorist hands and responsibly reducing the overall threat of an attack from any actor. However, by cutting the [missile defense program](#) and [air defense shield](#), the Obama administration continues to make backwards decisions on our national security that directly conflict with his goal to create stability through nuclear arms reduction.
- ***Still [Can't Be Seen in Public Together](#):*** While the summit meeting was not supposed to focus on individual nations Israel's Prime Minister withdrew from the meeting over concerns that some countries planned to turn the focus on Israel's nuclear program and its refusal to sign the nonproliferation treaty. Israel is placed in a unique position in the Middle East as it is the only state consistently threatened by a regime (Iran) that illicitly seeks nuclear weapons and openly calls for Israel's destruction. In addition, the Iranian regime supports organizations (like Hezbollah & Hamas) that continuously attack Israel's civilians with missiles, rockets and other means.

Some conservatives believe that allowing this to is just another example of the Obama administration's heightened rhetoric against Israel - our nation's strongest ally in the Middle East. This lack of diplomatic and strategic support for our strongest ally in the world's most unstable region only serves to [encourage other nations](#) to raise the bar with criticism and threats against Israel.

- ***Usurping Sovereignty:*** In addition to supporting the ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in the NPR, the Administration has also allowed the Russian government to use the New START treaty language as [political leverage](#) over future U.S. deployments of missile defense components because of perambulatory language linking offensive and defensive weapons.
- ***Rogue Threats Need Real Sanctions:*** According to the Secretary Gates, Iran does not have the capacity to build a nuclear warhead for at least one additional year, despite the fact that some experts believe they are even closer after they announced successful testing of third generation centrifuges capable of enriching uranium six times faster than under current known capabilities. Some conservatives have expressed concern that, despite all reported success of the summit, it [failed to enact a binding agreement](#) to ensure nations like China and Russia would enforce proposed sanctions on Iran. The summit failed to achieve any meaningful progress in dealing with the significant threat posed by Iran's nuclear weapons program.

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